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ABSTRACT

Most English teachers probably find it difficult to develop a grading system that takes into account the problems of individual students and that effectively communicates to students the quality of their work. Educators have been experimenting with written grading systems since the first system, one of predetermined adjectives, was used at Yale University in 1785. Almost 100 years later, Harvard University began using letter grades, but after only two years changed to a pass/fail system. The problems of lack of agreement in grading, student competition, and students choosing courses offering easy high marks were just as common a century ago as they are today. Research in the area of grading has been surprisingly neglected, and what little that has been done suggests that grading systems have not improved much in the last 100 years. Students still regard grades in terms of reward and punishment. A system of only marking papers with written comments and meeting with students for a grade conference to discuss "why" they think a certain grade is appropriate for their work can translate grades into useful information about the student's work. Active participation in the grading process can substantially reduce student dissatisfaction with the grading system. (HTH)

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WHAT DOES GRADING MEAN, ANYWAY?

Introduction

For me, teaching English in an open-admissions community college has been, for the most part so far, a splendid way to spend the working portion of my life. And I say this as an owner of a complete set of teaching problems similar to yours: an inadequate salary, too many students with too many needs, an excessive number of teaching hours, ever-present committee assignments, a vast range of student abilities, and a never-emptying briefcase filled with papers and exams.

Still, where else could I find the constantly changing challenges and rewards that come from helping such a democratic group of people discover the power that comes from increasing their abilities to use and understand language at a higher level than before they entered the college English classroom?

There has been, however, one aspect of teaching that has given me a great deal of difficulty--the assigning of grades. Eight years ago when I first started teaching, the ability to assign grades seemed to be the one aspect of teaching I was sure that I could handle. After all, when I was a student I had always been graded and I was certain that all I had to do to my own students was to repeat exactly what had been done to me by my own teacher. Surely all I had to do to devise a grading system that made sense both to me and my students was to set up a scale of points corresponding to certain letter grades and add up the total number of points each student had earned and then divide that total by the number of papers and exams I had decided to give when I wrote my course outline.

Would it had been so simple! I soon discovered grading students fairly and accurately demanded that I balance justice and mercy in a way that made me

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understand for the first time how tough a job God has! I hadn't counted on having to deal with the student who struggled and struggled and still only did barely passing work. Was I to assign his grade according to his improvement and efforts or was I to judge him against an outside standard that ignored his sometimes Herculean efforts? What about the student who didn't try at all and who still managed to do average or above average work? What about the difference between my definition of the terms "excellent" and "average" as opposed to my students' vastly differing definitions of these terms. Was I to give in to the pressures of grade inflation and tell average students that their work was excellent? What about the student for whom an "F" would be so utterly devastating that he might never return to the college classroom as opposed to the student for whom an "F" would be the startling incentive needed to set him on the path to academic achievement?

That fact that I had not developed a grading system that really made sense for me or my students showed up over and over in my student evaluations. Although my students rated me highly in everything else, they evaluated me less than satisfactorily on the fairness of my grades. Though I am the kind of teacher who has positive relations with most--not all, but most--of my students, I became increasingly aware of the unhappiness on the part of my students with my grading system. I wouldn't be exaggerating too much if I told you that I kept an eraser in my coat pocket in case I found myself in the men's room staring at x-rated grafetti featuring my name and composed by a student who had told me earlier "YOU GAVE ME A C!"

Although it was tempting at first to dismiss the student complaints, I decided not to say too quickly that the students were absolutely wrong and I was absolutely right. One thing for sure: I was not communicating in any meaningful way to them through the symbols of grades.

As a result of my frustrations, I began to do quite a bit of reading and reflecting on the matter of grading, and I learned how to clear up some of the misunderstandings about grading between my students and me. For the next few minutes, I want to share some of my discoveries with you regarding the history of grading, the state of the current professional literature regarding this on-going problem for us as teachers of English, and finally, I want to suggest a way that I think the grading process can be made more meaningful for both our students as well as for ourselves.

I also want to leave some time for some of you to share your own points of view on the problem of assigning grades. After all, if this were not an area of interest or concern with you, the very title of my presentation--WHAT DOES GRADING MEAN, ANYWAY?--would have surely sent you quickly off to another session since I know that this room is not the closest one to the bar with its five o'clock magnetism.

History of Grading

A look at the history of grading reveals that today's problems regarding the assigning of grades are not new ones. Ever since educators have been using written grades--and to my surprise they had not always done so--they have become more and more dissatisfied with the methods used to arrive at and express their estimatesof their students' intellectual abilities. In short, there has been an orgy of experiments at evaluating student abilities and expressing this evaluation in some sort of grading system.

The emergence of written grading systems closely followed the development of the idea of the examination as a means of measuring individual attainments of students as well as providing motivation for these same students. In the early days of American higher education, the only examinations the students were submitted to were those required for degrees or for entrance--and these

examinations were lax as well as oral. The attempts to begin to use examinations for more frequent and for more stringent evaluations of the students met with considerable student resistance. In 1762 at Yale, when examinations were announced, the students simply refused to be examined. In 1790 at Harvard, the juniors and seniors went on a rampage.

When stoning the examination room did not stop the examination process, some of the students, according to an account left by B. H. Hall:

> obtained six hundred grains of tartar emetic, and early on the morning of April 12th, the day on which the examination was to begin, emptied [the laxative] into the great cooking boilers in the kitchen. At breakfast, 150 or more students and officers being present, the coffee was brought on, made with the water from the boilers. Its effects were soon visible. One after another left the hall, some in a slow, others in a hurried manner, but all plainly showing that their situation was by no means a pleasant one. Out of the whole number there assembled, only four or five escaped without being made unwell. Those who put the drug in the coffee had drunk the most, in order to escape detection, and were consequently the most severely affected.

Not until the end of the Eighteenth Century could American college students be expected to submit peacefully to being examined.

Although authentic records of the earliest methods of evaluation of students in American colleges are difficult to come by and although there were always some attempts to grade a student's performance by giving public recognition to honor students and by assigning commencement parts based on a student's performance, current research credits Yale University with the first written marking system in the year 1785. The source of this information is a footnote in the diary of the Yale President. The first written grading system used the descriptive adjectives: optimi, second optimi, inferiores, and pejores. Besides using these descriptive adjectives to mark the exams, notes were taken of the number of students receiving each mark. In case you have a mind that thrives on trivia, of the first 58 students in America who received, written grades, 20 were judged optimi, 16 were judged second optimi, 12 were judged inferiores, and 10 were

judged pejores. For those who go by strict percentages, I suppose it could be concluded that grade inflation was with us from the very beginning.

Given the variety of scales that came into existence soon after 1800, one can conclude that educators were realizing that written evaluations or grades were a necessary as well as a desirable part of academic procedure. If you will permit me to play educational historian for another minute, I would like to point out some of the different grading scales first used by American educators.

By 1813 Yale had replaced the Latin terms with a marking system based on a scale of 4. The number system was more satisfactory than the Latin terms because the use of decimals increased the possible range of the four points. Seventeen years later, Harvard was using a number system but that system was based on a scale of 20. This scale of 20, by the way, was used for marking examinations in rhetoric. Seven years later, marking at Harvard was done on the basis of the now familiar 100 points--a breakthrough made by Harvard's mathematical and philosophical faculties.

By 1883--almost a hundred years after the first written grades were assigned at Yale--letter grades began to be used at Harvard as a means of marking. Records indicate that the Harvard faculty was realizing that minute uses of a percentage system was unsatisfactory for expressing the students' attainments and was actually leading to undesirable competition. In 1895, only two years after letter grades had begun to be used, the faculty at Harvard decided to grade students into only three categories: "failed," "passed," and "passed with distinction." The faculty did qualify these three distinctions for the first time with the now familiar plus and minus signs.

In 1896 Mount Holyoke College developed a grading plan which is most like the plan in general use today. That is, Mount Holyoke combined the three types of grading which several of the colleges at one time or another

had used separately--descriptive adjectives, percentages, and group letters. For example, the letter "A" which indicated excellent work also indicated that the student had earned 95-100 points out of a possible 100.

Despite the ingenuity shown by various faculties in developing these different grading scales in the 19th century, the faculties found the grading of students to be just as obnoxious as most of us find it today. There is an interesting--somewhat comforting--passage about the problems of grading in an 1890 history of Harvard by W. R. Thayer who writes:

> though [Harvard's grading] scale was the same, no two instructors agreed in their use of it...some frankly admitted that it was impossible to get within five or ten percent of absolute exactness; others were so delicately constituted that they could distinguish between fractions of one percent. One instructor was popularly supposed to possess a marking "machine"; another sometimes assigned marks less than zero.

Besides the problem of no two instructors agreeing in their use of the same grading scale--a problem certainly not uncommon today--the first faculties to begin assigning written grades to students encountered other problems similar to today's. In 1886, for example, President Eliot at Harvard was worried about how the growing emphasis on grades was tempting some students to choose subjects according to the marks they might receive rather than from the educational value of the subject. Ironically, then as now, the very practice which was begun to provide motivation for higher academic standards sometimes actually worked against the attainment of such standards. Some students became too competitive regarding their marks, but the typically negative or indifferent attitude toward grades on the part of most students is recorded by Edward Everett Hale in his autobiography entitled A New England Boyhood when he writes of the "very great indifference to college rank on the part of most of the students. But in the bosoms of our families there was a great respect for it."

Other educators worried that while they could and were measuring the quantity of knowledge of their students, they could not really measure and were not measuring the quality of the students' knowledge. Concern was also often expressed over whether grading was compatible with the aims of a democracy. Under the mood of Jacksonian Democracy, the first experiment in abandoning grades was made.

Although the monstrous aspects of grades were recognized almost with the first uses of them, the growing emphasis on professional standards in American higher education in the period between the Reform or Romantic era before the Civil War and the Progressive Era at the turn of the Century led to both students and faculties accepting more and more as inevitable the necessity of a marking system. America was increasingly becoming a society emphasizing meritorious recognition based upon individual competition. The college classroom--and one's performance in it--was more and more becoming the arena which determined one's entry into an increasingly professionalized society.

The growing importance of grades after the mid-nineteenth century was the result of the shift in emphasis in American education toward personal achievement and the growing individual desire to succeed. Students were more and more seeing themselves in a race with each other. Their timekeeper in the race was the faculty member who used a gradebook rather than a stopwatch to call the winners of the race. Further evidence of the new meaning and importance of grades in American colleges during this period was the decision made by faculties beginning around 1869 to separate for the first time the scales of scholarship and conduct. No longer would a student's standing on the intellectual scale of merit be partially determined by his personal behavior. Absences from church, tardiness, and unprepared lessons would no longer be considered in the grading process.

The Professional Literature

In a day in which it seems that every possible topic in American education has been "dissertated" to death, the area of grading has been surprisingly neglected. The most substantial piece of research regarding grading systems I have found is a dissertation entitled An Historical Study of Examinations and Grading Systems in Early American Universities, written in 1934 by Mary Lovett Smallwood. The other book of most value, which I have found regarding the subject of grades--even though it only incidentally treats the subject of grading--is Burton Bledstein's The Culture of Professionalism. Bledstein's book is currently available in paperback from Norton.

The general education journals offer us teachers little help in coming to terms with the problems of grades. Recently the majority of the literature published has dealt with the issue of grade inflation and has generally concluded a second collapse of the Roman Empire will occur if this problem is not corrected.

Our professional journals dealing with the teaching of English tell us that we English teachers are having more trouble with grading than anyone else in the teaching profession. After all, we do have to deal with a lot of variables as we evaluate writing--an ambiguous art more than a exact science--thank God! For example the most recent issue of College English features an article entitled "Grading in the 70's: How We Changed." Based on a study conducted in 1972 and 1978 in which seven instructors of English composition were given the same essay to grade six years apart, the article concludes that no teacher gave the same essay the same grade, that a final assessment of a student paper is based on qualitative instead of quantitive factors, and that the criteria for "quality" varies from instructor to instructor as well as from historical moment to historical moment.

An earlier and fairly typical article on grading from the same journal is entitled "Making Grading Work." In spite of its promising title, the well-intentioned article really only describes a baroque procedure which requires that students use numbers instead of names on their papers. The teacher then sets up a card file which links the student's self-chosen number on the back of his card to his name on the front of the card. Each numbered, but unnamed paper, is then read by two--sometimes three--teachers. The grade and comments are then recorded on cassette tapes by the instructors and then the numbered but unnamed student gets to hear the tape. It's hard not to wonder why the editor of College English didn't insist that the authors more accurately entitle the article "How to Make Grading More Work."

About all I have been able to gain from a fairly close study of the current professional literature addressing the issue of grading is that we're not much better--in fact not any better--at this business than we were two hundred years ago when the whole process got started for the first time.

A Way of Making the Grading Process More Meaningful

Even though I am fairly convinced, as a result of the research I have done regarding grading of students, that we would be doing the wisest thing to get rid of grades altogether and learn for the sake of learning instead of learning to collect gold stars, the grading process has become too ingrained in the American educational system for this to become a likely possibility. Therefore, I set out to determine whether there was some way I could get these A's, B's , C's, D's, and F's to make some sort of sense, to convey some sort of real information to my students.

Although I wasn't sure for quite awhile what grades really meant, I was becoming more and more convinced of some of the things they really did not mean. In spite of what I thought grades meant when I myself was a student or when I even first began to teach, I knew grades WERE NOT FAULTLESS INDICATORS OF ABSOLUTE PERFORMANCES and I needed to stop trying to think that they were or

force them to be such. In spite of the fact that a grade I assign looks formidably authoritative on a student's record, in the end that grade is really only an indicator of my individual judgment of the quality of a student's performance in a narrow field in which I have some expertise; a grade is not some overall infalliable assessment of quality regarding a student's overall worth.

It was through reading the educational psychologist Jerome Bruner that I finally figured out what grades could really mean anyway. Bruner points out that students need to experience success and failure not in the simple terms of reward and of punishment but as information. I began to realize that the problem I was having with my students regarding the grades I was assigning them was the result of their reading the grades in the simplistic terms of reward and punishment rather than in terms of meaningful pieces of information they might choose to make something useful out of. What I had to figure out was some way of getting my students to see that what grades really meant was that the learning continuum had been momentarily and artificially interrupted for the purpose of taking stock.

It seemed to me that the only way to get the students to understand that grading was a matter of stopping to take stock was to actively involve them in the process of determining their grades. This has to be handled very carefully, because I didn't want this to turn into the superficial game of grading oneself that I had been asked to play two or three times when I was a student. I was smart enough then to detect the game being played by the teacher when I was asked to write down what I thought I ought to get for a grade in the course. I--and almost everyone else in the class with a modicum of sense--knew to write down an "A" on the chance that the teacher might just give me what I gave myself. I was after more than this with my students. I wanted to force them to experience in a <u>responsible</u> way the ambiguities and uncertainties of the grading process. I wanted them to see for themselves just what a grade could and could not tell them.

I began the experiment by telling the students in the composition courses that I would not be putting letter grades on any of their papers, but that I would read all of their papers carefully and respond to what they said with written comments or questions. They were free to take the comments for what they were worth and if they thought they could produce a better paper by having a second go at the writing assignment, then I was as willing to read as many versions as they had energy to produce. All I would enter in my grade book was whether each paper was submitted and the number of times any particular paper had been rewritten. I told them that at some point before the mid-term each of them would bring his folder of completed assignments up to that point to me and together we would discuss the work in terms of a letter grade. I did tell the students that if the absence of letter grades on the papers caused anyone considerable anxiety, I would talk about grades with them but the students had to initiate the conversation.

Being the fine, normal students that they were, they did not pay that much attention to what I said about the matter of grading on the first day of the course, but once they started getting their papers returned with only comments and open-ended questions, I saw most of them actually reading my comments instead of cursorily glancing at the grade before consigning the paper away forever between the pages of a textbook or dumping it into the garbage can. They began one by one to start asking me what the comments meant. I thought of Bruner's remarks about how students did not experience grades as information as I noticed that no matter how the student phrased the question about what I had written on the paper it could be translated into IS THIS A GOOD REMARK OR A BAD REMARK; IS THIS A PUNISHMENT OR A REWARD? I stated over and over to the students that the comments were no more or no less than my honest response to what the student had said and that the issue of goodness or badness was irrelevant. In

other words, I was talking to them with my written remarks--not judging them with grades.

Finally what I had hoped for happened: the class as a whole insisted that we talk gradetalk. With some hesitation, I just told them what I have basically told you in the opening remarks of this paper. I found my students were fascinated, almost flabergasted at my openly sharing with them the sense of frustration I had experienced in accurately and fairly assigning grades. After explaining how I felt that grades really got in the way of learning, I went on to explain that composition was not something they would completely learn in three quarters even if the course catalogue talked about it as if it happened this way. Their learning how to write would go on after the class ended as long as they continued to write at all. The grade that each of them would receive at the end of the artifically-determined ten-week period was no more than a carefully-rendered opinion of one fallible man with some experience in the field of writing who was required to stop and take stock of where he thought each of his students stood on one part of the learning continuum. The only real value the grade had for the student was that it could give him some idea of where he was at that particular point in time so he might decide where it was that he needed to go.

I then talked with the students about how grades were symbols of words whose exact meanings were not absolutely fixed but whose broad meanings were not absolutely indefinite either. For example, the word "average"--which covers a broad range--in no way can mean excellent but it can in no way mean poor either. I told them as clearly as I could what the words "excellent," "good," "average," and "fair" meant to me and that I could not corrupt the meanings of the symbols used to indicate these words and still function as a responsible teacher.

I didn't, of course, deny that some segments of our society place a lot of importance on grades, but I also pointed out that one really needs to remember that in one hundred years one won't even know what one's grades were. Instead, it is what one learns that will really matter during the course of that remaining one hundred years of one's life. Over and over and over, every chance I got, I insisted on pointing out one became a student to learn and not to get grades. If you think I was pointing out the obvious, just think back to your own attitude toward and experiences with grades when you were a student. Didn't they assume a ridiculous amount of importance given the minuscule things they really were?

Sitting down with each student for an individual grade conference at mid-term was an interesting and surprising experience for me the first time I tried it, because the students were better at participating in the grading process than I had expected them to be. I had asked each student to sign up for an appointment at which he or she was to appear on time with his folder of completed writing assignments, ready to tell me what letter grade he or she should receive if at that point in time a letter grade for the course had to be assigned. I stressed that I was as much interested in the specific reasons for the grade as much as the actual grade itself. I was actually maybe more interested in what followed the <u>because</u> in the "I think I should have a "B" because...than I was interested in the letter grade that preceeded the because. The fact that the student had to articulate the specific reasons for the actual letter grade resulted in the student opinion agreeing with my own about 95% of the time. After all, our students are smart enough to know what they're doing compared with what they're capable of doing and they usually respond enthusiastically to the chance to have a real voice in what is being done to them as students. Too rarely, I think, does our educational system give them this chance.

After the student expressed the grade he thought he should receive and why, I was able to extend the conversation to such areas as whether the student was satisfied with that particular grade. If not, we discussed what the student needed to do in order to raise the grade to the desired level. Real information was being exchanged between us; the student did not see himself in a pssive role before an arbitrary judge.

I've used this method for a couple of years now, and I do not cease to be amazed at watching my students accurately assess their own work. My grade book is not filled with inflated grades as a result of this approach, but my students do indicate on their evaluations that they are satisfied with my grading system now. They now see the marks as information they can use. My improved student evaluations in the area of grading makes both my chairman and me happier.

Most important, since I'm not now allowing my students to use grades as a substitute for the reward of understanding, I think they are discovering that learning need not cease at graduation, the time those peaky little symbols finally disappear from their lives.

For helping them discover the real purpose of an education, I deserve an "A". For your patience with hearing me this afternoon, you deserve an "A+". Thank you.